

Todd Blackledge

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Blackledge Reunites With First Love

Article Text:

There was a time when Todd **Blackledge** thought he would be a basketball player in college. His interest in being Hoover High School's head boys basketball coach wasn't a whim.

Most people know **Blackledge** because, after graduating from Hoover, he led Penn State to the 1982 national title. Then he was a first-round NFL Draft pick in the famed 1983 quarterback draft.

Now **Blackledge** is one of ESPN's leading college football analysts, which could cause some problems. To understand **Blackledge**'s interest in the position, you have to understand that basketball was his first love.

"I tell people this all the time: Basketball was my favorite sport, baseball might've been my best sport, and I made a career out of football," **Blackledge** said. "I enjoyed them all, but basketball was my favorite."

Just before his senior year at North Canton Hoover was about to start, **Blackledge** took a trip south to test his hoop skills.

He went to Milledgeville, Ga., with McKinley's David Greer and Alliance's Kevin Gaffney. The three of them were invited to the BC All-Star camp because they were three of the better players from Northeast Ohio.

"There were 250 kids from all over the country," **Blackledge** said. "I went down there with the idea that if I felt like I could compete with the top kids there, I was going to make a commitment to play basketball."

I thought about not playing football.

"I went down there and it was an eye-opening experience for me. There were kids who were 6-7, 6-8, 6-9, and they could do everything I could do."

Blackledge was about 6-foot-4 in high school and 215 pounds.

"I looked like a football player out there," **Blackledge** said. "I did OK, but Antoine Carr was the MVP of the camp. He was 6-9 and playing point guard. Ralph Sampson was there. I had to guard him a couple of games. I spent a week there and came back and realized I could've went and played basketball somewhere small, but I knew I had opportunities in football."

Blackledge was a football coach's son. He was a three sport athlete who moved around the country as his father, Ron **Blackledge**, changed jobs. **Blackledge** started high school in Princeton, N.J., and finished in North Canton.

By the time he returned from that camp in Georgia, **Blackledge** knew where his future would be. It was football, and it was at quarterback.

"If I didn't play quarterback, I don't know how much I would have loved playing football," **Blackledge** said. "I remember the first year I played football was in the seventh grade in Lexington, Ky. The seventh-, eighth-and ninth-grade teams were together in the junior high school and made one team. I was a seventh grader and just got beat up everyday at practice. I was a scout team, tackling dummy guy. Our coach was about 350 pounds. He was a mean grizzly bear guy. A phys-ed teacher who scared everyone to death. It was not an enjoyable experience."

Blackledge stayed with football, all the while he continued to play basketball in high school. Now it is sort of coming full circle for him. He gets to coach the sport at the varsity level that was his first love.

TWO GAMES

Unless Hoover Athletic Director Don Shimek is able to change things, **Blackledge** will miss the Vikings' first game Dec. 5 against Akron North.

His TV duties for ESPN will have him at a game Dec. 6, the regular-season finale for college football. The other game that will be a problem is the Glen Oak game Jan. 9. The national title game is Jan. 12 and **Blackledge** will have studio assignments during that week.

ESPN IS ON BOARD

Blackledge spoke to his superiors about coaching high school basketball at the varsity level before progressing with the Hoover process, and he said they were receptive to the idea.

"Like I told them, I've thought this through," **Blackledge** said. "Certainly, my first allegiance work wise is to them (ESPN). It is not going to affect my work or my preparation. Over the course of a year, I have a lot of time on my hands. I'm at a point in my life where I'm ready for a few challenges, and I'm excited about stretching myself a little bit.

ESPN knows what my work ethic is like."

NOFTZ TO HOOVER?

Blackledge is looking for a veteran assistant coach to join his staff, and he may have a difficult time doing better than Keith Noftz.

The former McKinley coach is retiring, but Noftz will be on a bench next season at some school.

He has college coaching experience, and he would be a sound, capable basketball mind to turn the keys over to during the times **Blackledge** can't be at practice or a game.

Caption:

AP FILE

Long before he was a first-round NFL Draft pick by the Kansas City Chiefs, Todd **Blackledge** wanted to be a basketball player. A trip to a camp in Georgia changed his mind and steered him toward football.

Now, he's returning to basketball as the head boys coach at Hoover.

NOFTZ

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